

Student activism: An exploration of pre-service teacher engagement

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This study investigated university student activism from both a theoretical and applied perspective. The aims were to explore some of the elements that might enable or constrain student activism and to facilitate the students' opportunity to act on an issue of their choice. The three elements of self-efficacy, group work, and time were reviewed in the literature and used as a framework to gather data, the collection of which was completed in three sequential phases: a questionnaire, interviews, and an action research project. Sixty questionnaires were returned and, from these, eight students were interviewed and engaged in the action research project. Results from the questionnaire indicated that students were quite time poor with the median student spending more hours per week working than studying. Further results from the questionnaire as well as the interviews and action research project suggested that the element of self-efficacy had less of an effect on students' activism than did group work or time, both of which were enabling when present and constraining when absent.

Keywords: student activism, student politics, civic education

Introduction

This study explored the topic of university student activism. The main research question posed was: what are some of the elements that enable or constrain students' activism? *The Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice* states that while activism is not well defined, it 'is action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine' (Martin, 2007, p. 19). Actions which are considered conventional or routine may be relative and difficult to define and so act to obscure a clearer definition; for actions which are ordinary and acceptable in one time or place might be plainly disallowed in others – universal suffrage, for example. Some important Australian educational policy can be interpreted as favouring this study. For instance,

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, a joint declaration by all state and territory Ministers of Education describes 'active and informed citizens' who 'work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving natural and social systems' (Barr *et al.*, 2008, p. 9), and *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship* refers to 'preparation of active and empowered citizens includ[ing] opportunities for students to...actively engage in practical citizenship activities within schools, in the community and online' (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012, p. 5). Note that there is no contradiction between 'working for the common good' or 'actively engaging in practical citizenship activities' and engaging in action which is not routine. The length to which some environmentalists go to protect the natural world, which

sustains all of life, serves as an obvious example and many others abound. The emphasis in both documents is on action and an active citizenry.

The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2013), the largest international study of civic and citizenship education ever conducted (p. 5), found considerable variation with the content and method of civic and citizenship education both within and across the thirty-eight participating countries, but one of the central outcomes of civic and citizenship education named is 'prepar[ing] young people...to be informed and active citizens' (p. 9). Given this outcome and the range of content and conduct considered in the ICCS, student activism, at least as it has been conceived in this study, fits quite well within that scope and bears squarely on that outcome. Yet, although Australia has sufficient educational policy to promote active citizenship, university teacher-training programs do not necessarily address this aspect of the curriculum well (Donnison, 2004), nor is there a consensus on what this might entail (Peterson & Knowles, 2009). The aim of this study was to provide an opportunity for students to engage with a political, social, economic, or environmental issue of their choice, and in so doing, answer the research question set out above.

Background

Much of the research on student activism is descriptive in nature and seeks to report or at best explain some of its features (see for example Barcan, 2011; Darby, 2001; Dominguez, 2009; Robertson, 2013; Sankaran & Chng, 2012). In reviewing the literature on youth, but not necessarily student, political participation, Fyfe (2009) contends that most research in this domain has been confined to conventional political actions such as voting, party campaign work and running for office. In its place he recommends moving toward an understanding of the many non-conventional means of political action such as issue-specific protesting as well as new ones like online mobilisation through social media.

Researchers in the field of political science have considered a number of conventional and non-conventional means to include youth participation in politics but many have found the results lacking. For instance, youth councils, one common method of giving young people a voice in political matters, have been argued to conceal the large numbers of voices which remain unheard and to be more about assuaging the consciences of the adults who set them up, rather than

responding to a genuine demand of the youth whom they serve (Matthews, 2001). Moreover, Taft and Gordon (2013) argue that many youth activists recognise this insincerity and view youth councils as elitist and as a tactic for mitigating youth participation. Vromen and Collin (2010) concur and argue that youth political participation has usually been formal in structure and excludes many students' voices. Instead they recommend political authorities seek out young people's places of expression and try to include their voices in more informal and fun ways than has traditionally been done and create policies to make this effective. Bessant (2003, 2004) also agrees and concludes that despite much rhetoric about increasing youth political participation, the policies promoted have been to increase the governance of, rather than by, young people. Her suggestion is to make youth participation effective through further policy reform which, while not unimportant, overlooks the fact that a number of avenues of political participation are already available to people of all ages through activism and direct action, just as Vromen and Coleman's (2011) treatment of GetUp shows.

In trying to discover some important elements enabling or constraining student activism, the field of social psychology provides a robust research tradition on the causes and conditions of protest specifically (see for example van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013), as well as collective action generally (see for example Klandermans, van der Toorn, & van Stekelenburg, 2008; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). However, this field of research has at least two major, and related, differences from the study in this article: (i) the purpose of the research does not attempt to facilitate activist engagement, but merely to observe and explain the elements of social and political movements, and (ii) it has a strong commitment to a positivist research paradigm with an emphasis on measurement, quantitative data analysis, prediction, and 'the thorny issue of causality' (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013, p. 898) (see for example Gould, 1993; Kelly & Breinlinger, 1995; Klandermans & Oegema, 1987; Klandermans, Sabucedo, Rodriguez, & de Weerd, 2002; Oegema & Klandermans, 1994; Stürmer, Simon, Loewy, & Jörger, 2003; Tausch & Becker, 2013; van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & van Dijk, 2009; van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012). However, Gamson's *Talking Politics* (1992), which laid a framework of elements of collective action and which was subsequently used by much social psychological research, was based on a qualitative, rather than quantitative, analysis of thirty-seven peer group conversations. His work, drawing on others before him, used the three elements of injustice, or what is sometimes

referred to as grievances, agency, or what is sometimes referred to as efficacy, and identity. Each of these three elements was used in order to describe and explain people's participation in social movements. Yet, Gamson's work also differs from point (i) above and he states '[t]hose of us still located in academia continue to struggle to make the university a resource for social movements' (Gamson, 2005, p. 278).

Within the field of education there are a few studies which have a similar aim and methodology to this one. For example, working within a high school context, Bencze, Sperling, and Carter (2012) investigated how teachers can try to enable their science students to use their own research to inform their activism for a socio-scientific issue. Their findings suggest that a countless number of elements may affect students' activism, but focussed on curriculum policy statements, school culture, teacher characteristics, and student-generated research findings. Marri and Walker (2008) also investigated ways of enabling students' activism at a high school level, though their study was with students of colour and investigated how they could engage them in activism associated with race-related issues. Though their study did not specifically seek to discover what elements might enable or constrain students' activism, they give the following advice to anyone attempting to develop young activists: include an initiation component where students discuss the issues they are interested in, a history component reviewing the role that young people have had in social movements, a reflection component where students brainstorm ideas about how to address their problems, and an action component where they implement their ideas.

Methodology & data collection

The author has taught Human Society and Its Environments (HSIE) to primary school pre-service teachers for about two and a half years. This class is essentially a social sciences amalgam and includes topics such as civics and active citizenship, values education, and discrimination. Tutorial discussions are the furthest extent of engagement with the issues covered in the class and for this reason, the author wanted to try and create more opportunities for students to act on them. However, because the author had little influence on the course syllabus, this study was

created entirely as an extra-curricular activity and it was made very clear that the students' participation or lack thereof would not affect their grades in any way. As such, the students who participated did so entirely of their own volition, and many chose not to.

The students in the study were undergraduates enrolled in a Bachelor of Education (Primary) program and they ranged in age from late teens to their forties. In addition to the HSIE class described above some students were taking a class called English Issues. A large majority of the students were female, which is to be expected given the current demographics of the Australian primary pre-service teacher cohort (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013). The study was undertaken in a regional university in Southeast Queensland which values, among other things, advancing human rights, pursuing social, economic, and environmental sustainability, acting in a fair and equitable manner, and engaging with the community through scholarship (Council of Southern Cross University, 2014, p. 3). As such, the university was well positioned to support this

kind of study since the author expected many of the issues around which students would mobilise would address these values.

Data collection in this study proceeded in three sequential phases: (i) a questionnaire, (ii) semi-structured interviews, and (iii) an action research project. An information sheet describing the study was given to students in class with the thrust of the description being that students were to involve themselves in the resolution of a social, political, economic, or environmental issue of their choice with the help of the author and, where overlapping interests occurred, other students as well. There was a certain tension in the research design between allowing the students to choose the issue in which they were interested and around which they would mobilise, and encouraging the students to work with others as part of a group. Choosing the issue which concerned most students and trying to encourage the entire group to mobilise around it would have been effective in creating a large group that could work together, though many members might not have cared much about the issue chosen. After some deliberation it was decided that the study would be most authentic if each student named the issue in which they were most interested and the group work presumed necessary for effective activism facilitated

by suggesting that students with similar interests join together or with existing groups pursuing each of their issues (*cf.* Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012). The author also attempted to create solidarity amongst his students by insisting on learning and using all of his students' names and by encouraging his students to do the same with the help of name tags.

About 110 questionnaires were given out at the end of class and completed at home where necessary. Questions asked about how the students spent their time during the week, their previous activist experience, whether or not they believed in their self-efficacy, and any social, political, economic, or environmental issues they were concerned about. The results from the questionnaires were used to winnow the respondents down to a smaller group to interview by case-sampling (Flick, 2010, p. 115). This also was a research design decision which was made with much deliberation. As much as the author would have preferred to work with all of his students in trying to resolve each of their chosen issues, in practice this would have been impossible due to time and energy constraints (*cf.* Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012). As a result seven students were selected to interview, with one additional student interviewed during the action research project, for a total of eight interviews. The students were chosen so as to provide a variety of answers from the questionnaire. In other words, some interviewees had a fair bit of previous activist experience, but one had none, and while some believed in their self-efficacy others were not sure. During the interviews students were mostly asked 'why' questions about their responses on the questionnaire, as well as other questions related to this study to try and ascertain the students' reasons for acting the way they did or for believing what they did. The interviews were audio recorded, the conversations transcribed, and the transcripts member checked (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 136).

These same interviewees then engaged in an action research project to try and resolve the social, political, economic, or environmental issue of their choice and to provide an opportunity to compare some of the theoretical results from the questionnaires and interviews with the practical ones which arose in the action research phase. This was important since what students say they are willing to do in theory may not be what they actually do in practice (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013, pp. 898-899). This began by the author sending out a group email priming the students for the action research phase, inviting them to 'reply all' in solidarity with the other students involved so as to use the group as a support

network and as a means for sharing their experiences and learning from one another, particularly in the cases where the issues in which students were interested overlapped. Following this, many individual emails, phone calls, and occasional face-to-face exchanges were made between the author and the students in order to chart their progress. The author kept an action research journal as a means of recording events, conversations, and observations (Cohen *et al.*, 2007, p. 300), and for the purpose of maintaining the students' anonymity, used pseudonyms throughout this paper.

Elements influencing students' activism

As some of the literature reviewed above suggests, myriad possible elements might enable or constrain student activism. This study focussed on three however: self-efficacy, group work, and time.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy may play an important role in helping to explain why people engage in activism since we might expect that those who believe in their power to effect change will be the ones more likely to do so. Bandura (1977, p. 193) refers to self-efficacy as an individual's conviction that one's behaviour can produce expected outcomes. However, Velasquez and LaRose (2015) emphasise the importance of distinguishing between self-versus collective-efficacy since many political actions are made en masse rather than as an individual effort. Their main results suggest that online collective political activism is better predicted by efficacy at the collective, rather than individual level. For the purposes of this study, although online activity was not a central focus, the contrast between individual- and collective-efficacy was nonetheless investigated via the element of group work, which is discussed below.

Wollman and Stouder (1991) also dissected the concept of efficacy, but in their study did so along the lines of overall, political, and situation-specific efficacy, arguing that beliefs in general life efficacy do not necessarily accord with those in the political sphere. They further contend that specific political behaviour will be better predicted by a belief in the efficacy of that particular behaviour. This is a sensible argument, though the deterministic and quantitative approach they apply with the goal of prediction, when taken to the logical extreme, seems to imply that the best predictor of a given behaviour would involve making the most highly specified map of the world to account for every possible factor influencing the

Table 1: Results from the Questionnaire Regarding Students' Belief in Self-efficacy

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Unsure
I am an important contributor to society and I personally make a difference.	50%	6%	44%

participants' behaviour. What Wollman and Stouder seem to be driving at by investigating such situation-specific efficacy are the reasons an individual acts in a certain way and they admit that many other factors must be addressed than those investigated in their study to fully understand an individual's action. Consequently, as described above, most of the questions asked in the interview phase of this study were 'why' questions.

Results from the questionnaire with regard to the students' belief in their ability to cause change in society – their self-efficacy – are shown in Table 1. Although sixty questionnaires were returned, this part of the study was only completed by fifty students, perhaps because this table was on the back of the last page of the questionnaire and some did not think to look there.

Only half of the students believe that they are an 'important contributor to society' and 'personally make a difference.' This may have worrying consequences for the prospects of activism since if they do not believe they can make a difference one might expect that they will not bother trying. This is perhaps even more concerning since these students are studying to become teachers and might then, when they step into their occupation, be less inclined to think critically, struggle for social change, and more readily accept the status quo. However, half of the students in this study who agreed with the statement in Table 1, and thus believe in their self-efficacy, had never engaged in any form of activism, other than signing a petition. Conversely, all three students (six per cent) who disagreed with the statement, and thus do not believe in their self-efficacy, answered that they had participated in some form of activism beyond simply signing a petition; those actions were participating in a protest, calling in to a radio show, and participating in a march. And yet again, the one student who had participated in one of the most extreme forms of activism – a blockade – answered 'unsure' to the statement. Hence, the questionnaire phase produced some doubt as to how strongly self-efficacy might enable, or through lack thereof constrain, a student's activism.

Additional light was shed on this element during the interview and action research phases. All three students who actually engaged in some form of activism during the

action research project answered on their questionnaires that they believed in their self-efficacy; Neil and Elle both joined GetUp and signed petitions relating to their respective causes, and Brian became vegetarian to help promote animal rights, which could be construed as a very broad boycott. However, Winona had also answered that she believed in her self-efficacy, but did nothing during the action research phase even though she spoke passionately about her chosen issue of littering during the interview:

Winona: I haven't even spoken to you about putting this into anything but I already feel like... burning up.

Author: What do you mean?

Winona: A feeling of burning up, like as in, doing something... instead of just sitting here it's like a fire that you get – like when I thought about doing a protest about littering.

Reasons for Winona's lack of engagement during the action research phase appeared to be mostly due to lack of time, which is examined below. What was most revealing about the relationship between self-efficacy and activism however came from the interview with John. He had a range of previous activist experience but indicated in his questionnaire that he was unsure about his self-efficacy. Throughout his interview he maintained his belief that there is not much one person can do, not only for the refugee issue about which he had done nothing, but for those issues in which he had engaged in various forms of activism, each connected to either a high school being built near his home or a council's proposal to demolish a cricket club at which he said he had played for many years. These actions included writing to a newspaper, calling in to a radio show, attending a public meeting, participating in a march, as well as signing petitions online and on paper. When asked if any of the activist measures he had taken affected the council's decision he stated:

I'd say it might have swayed them a little bit, but we all know that with councils that if they've made up their mind they'll go through with it anyway, so it's just having people there that are against the council's decision to destroy it...there was enough people there to stop it.

Thus here, as well as in other parts of his interview, John's belief is that efficacy does not come from an individual, but from a group, which supports the group work element considered below. When asked if one person could make a difference by starting such a group John replied:

It'd be hard to try and find people that were as passionate as you to help towards that, and it's also trying to find the time between work and study, because a

group thing, everyone must be involved and you have to have one day at a certain time where everybody can get there and everyone can lobby, everyone can press their opinions...it's hard to try and find the right people, the time between work and study and personal life.

In addition to the importance of group work, here John points out another element mentioned in the literature below - time. Although it may be hard work as John suggested, he is arguing that what is necessary to create social change is for enough people with a similar interest to find the time to come together and express their opposition. To a lesser extent, Mandy's beliefs and experiences were the same: 'I've just never been a big believer of...one person can change...everything, like it definitely takes a lot more than just one, and I don't feel like I could personally make a big difference.'

Thus the triangulation of the results of the questionnaire, the students' ideas expressed in their interviews, and their actions in the action research phase suggests a conflicting relationship between a belief in one's self-efficacy and engagement with an issue through activism.

Group work

As mentioned above, another element which may affect activism may simply be called 'group work.' In short, we might expect that social change is unlikely to come from individuals, but instead by groups of like-minded people working together. In writing about how to understand the world and stay informed, world-renowned political activist Noam Chomsky writes: '[i] t's true that the task is somewhere between awfully difficult and utterly hopeless for an isolated individual. But it's feasible for anyone who is part of a cooperative community' (Chomsky, 1999, para. 1). Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013, p.890) concur when they write, citing several studies, that 'the more people identify with a group the more they are inclined to protest on behalf of that group.' The need to band together to create change may seem obvious, but laws prohibiting such association are not without precedent and in recent times the Queensland government's Vicious Lawless Association Disestablishment Act 2013 is one example. The law is meant to target bikie gangs but defines an association quite broadly in Section 3 as, among other things, 'any... group of 3 or more persons by whatever name called, whether associated formally or informally and whether the group is legal or illegal.' This has caused the Australian Human Rights Commission President, Professor Gillian Triggs, to criticise the law on the basis of the freedom of association contained in the International Covenant of

Civil and Political Rights, to which Australia is a signatory (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2013). Though there may be legitimate circumstances for banning the association of people, such as in wartime, activists must be mindful of the need to preserve their right to associate to effect change.

Most of the interactions between the author and the students in this study took place outside of class via email or phone, but there was nonetheless an important observation made by the author in class which impacted on the group work element of this study. Without exception, despite insisting on students using name tags in the tutorials, by the end of the semester not a single student knew the names of all the other students in their tutorial group. He noted the following exchange in his action research journal:

Author: How come you guys don't know each other's names?

Student: Because we just come here to class and then leave. There's nowhere else to go and nothing else going on.

This likely has adverse effects on the element of group work and the student body would appear to be quite fragmented. Many results from the questionnaire and interviews showed that the students are politically aware, socially conscious, and environmentally concerned, yet they are not interested in being part of, nor do they behave as, an integrated body *qua* students. This is not to say that the students may not be part of other groups which are mobilising for change on the issues about which they are concerned, but it seems clear, at least from this study, that the 'student' aspect of student activism, does not constitute a cohesive group which might be able to mobilise for some collective interest - it is far too disintegrated. Furthermore, none of the students responded to the group email sent to initiate the action research phase, though everyone eventually replied to emails which were sent to them individually. Also, as indicated above, the only activism in the action research phase involved Neil and Elle, both of whom joined GetUp to sign petitions related to their respective causes, and Brian who became vegetarian. And although Brian's decision might appear independent of others, he spoke at length in this interview about a range of actions he had taken in concert with other animal rights activists. These included helping his sisters, who look after rescue dogs and rehabilitate birds, attending rallies to oppose animal circuses, and working with others to remove flyers and signs promoting animal circuses.

Other results from the interviews also suggested that group work may enable student activism when present and constrain it when absent. When asked what strategies she thought would help get students active about an issue, Winona replied: 'maybe, researching into local... they're not projects I guess, but local groups that do...something about that and ...get them involved in a way.' Mandy gave a similar reply as she related this to her own experience of taking part in a demonstration: 'like a big gathering of...a whole group of people that believe in the...common good...that can definitely change something, and I felt like I was part of something, I felt like I was really contributing to something.' And in adding to the statements he had made earlier comparing self-versus collective-efficacy, when asked if one person can make a difference John stated: 'it won't make as much difference as a group or an activist lobby or anything along those lines but... one person can do something, but it won't be much.' The theme expressed by these students seems to be that, alone, one person is rather impotent but, when joined by many others, is able to exert political pressure and create social change. In short, those who acted or described previous actions did so or described doing so with others; nobody decided to work alone.

Time

That time is needed to do anything is obvious, and no less so for a student, teacher, or any responsible and engaged citizen to actively involve themselves in a political, social or environmental issue. Yet, university students and staff alike are becoming decreasingly able to mobilise for change due to lack of time; academics who are underpaid need to find external income streams (Nicholas, 2003) and students with increasing debt levels also need to find ways to create an income (Hall, 2010). In fact, a report by the Australian Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (McInnis & Hartley, 2002, p. xi) found that undergraduate students work an average of fifteen hours a week, with almost forty per cent working sixteen hours

Table 2: Results from the Questionnaire Regarding Students' Time

Hours Spent Working per Week	
<i>Hours</i>	<i>No. of Students</i>
0	5
1-4	2
5-9	9
10-14	9
15-19	20
20 or more	15
Total:	60

* Median is 17 hours per week

Hours Spent Studying per Week	
<i>Hours</i>	<i>No. of Students</i>
0	0
1-4	1
5-9	9
10-14	20
15-19	12
20 or more	18
Total:	60

* Median is 14.5 hours per week

Leisure Hours per Week	
<i>Hours</i>	<i>No. of Students</i>
0	0
1-4	7
5-9	19
10-14	16
15-19	7
20 or more	11
Total:	60

* Median is 12 hours per week

or more, and almost one fifth working twenty-one hours or more. Perhaps not surprisingly, sixty-three per cent reported that they were often overwhelmed by everything they had to do. This trend has continued with the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Survey of Education and Work showing that of all fifteen- to seventy-four-year-olds who are studying for a non-school qualification, some 2.2 million students, over two thirds, or about sixty-seven per cent are working either full- or part-time (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Although these statistics are not correlated with students' likeliness to engage in activism, some studies, such as in nursing (Salamonson, Everett, Koch, Andrew, & Davidson, 2012) and business (Richardson, Evans, & Gbadamosi, 2014) show that working while studying negatively impacts on students' study time and Grade Point Average. From this, we might surmise that any other activity, including engaging in activism, will suffer as students juggle both work and study. In this vein, Dominguez (2009) drew the ironic conclusion that many student activists adopt the neoliberal ideology and behaviour of 'time management' and 'multitasking' in order to include activism in their already busy schedules, even as they try to mobilise against its effects. Stenhouse and Jarrett (2012) also found that undergraduate students struggled to find time to participate in a program to implement social change. From this we might expect that students would be hard pressed to find the time to engage in any sort of activism, and if they did, to only a limited degree.

Results from the questionnaire with regard to how the students spend their time during the semester are shown in Table 2.

The number of hours the median student spent working each week supports the findings reviewed in the literature. What is most striking in these results however is that the median student spends more time working each week than studying. These students are enrolled in full-time study and yet they work only part-time. That such descriptors do not accurately reflect the relative amount

of time spent on each activity may belie a change in the traditional nature of undergraduate student life.

A couple of results from the interviews and action research project discussed above have already touched on the role that time may play in enabling student activism when present or constraining it when absent. Other excerpts from the interviews supporting this relationship follow:

Winona: I need to want to do more but, at the same time, you know, it's hard being a uni student, working two jobs, not really having any spare time as it is, but wanting to be able to help in some way...

Elle: I've never really, or not recently, because I seem to be on the go so much... sat down and sort of gone, alright, where can I sort of time manage to focus my energies on this [issue of Aboriginal communities]? And I guess when you've got a young family a lot of your energy sort of gets taken up with that process...

Neil: I currently have two jobs. I'm working at a Chinese take-away place as a delivery driver. I usually do that between ten to twelve hours a week. And then, sometimes they call me in for an after-school care job.

In the questionnaire, Neil had written that there was nothing he was doing about any of the issues in which he was interested, the reason being 'don't know where to begin.' When asked to elaborate on his comment in the interview he said: 'it's just hard to know where to start with these things. It's sort of like...I guess it's the complexity...and finding the time, obviously...busy schedule.' These comments seem to suggest that lack of time adversely affected the students' ability to engage in activism.

During the action research phase of the project some records of communication show the influence that time had on students' actual participation in activism. For example, upon the author's suggestion that she join some groups related to her named causes Barbara replied: 'Thank you Jason. I will look at those in the near future when I am not so busy with uni work. Sounds great.' However, this was the last and only bit of communication with Barbara during the entire action research phase. Furthermore, Winona sent the following text in response to the author's email suggesting some groups to join related to her named issues: 'Hi Jason, I've only just got home and I've got to start roast dinner. I haven't had time to check out the links in your emails with assignments due the last week. How about I get back to you when I've had a look?' However, the only other reply which came from Winona during the action research phase was in response to the author's request to check the transcript of her interview, which was: 'Hi Jason, I checked the first

page, it should be fine! Struggling to get my assignment in so need to finish it but I'm sure it's all OK!' The record of communication with Mandy was similar:

Hi Jason, just returning your phone call. I was in a tutorial when you called, so I was unable to answer. I've been struggling quite a bit with my work load at the moment. So am focusing on trying to keep on top of all my uni and work commitments, which is proving quite difficult.

The triangulation of results from each of the three phases of the study – the questionnaire, the interviews, and the action research project – suggest that students do not have much time to engage in activism due to their work and study loads.

Studying and teaching for active citizenship

Mentioned in the introduction were some important education policy documents which indicate that teachers will be expected to prepare students as active citizens. Nowhere in the HSIE course were students told that they would be expected to do this so perhaps we should not be surprised that almost half the students chose not to complete the questionnaire and participate in the study. For those sixty that did, eighteen of the respondents, or almost a third of them, ticked 'no' in response to the question: 'Are there any environmental, economic, political or social issues that you are concerned about today?' Added to this disjuncture between education and activism was the paucity of issues named on the questionnaire related to education. For the forty-two students that responded 'yes' to the question above, only five of them named an education-related issue. These were: 'education about the real world', 'education worldwide', 'deregulation of university fees', 'cuts to education' and 'education system in Australia.' Whether this was due to selflessness on the part of the students, ignorance of or apathy towards the then current attempts by the government to pass legislation to deregulate university tuition and cut funding, complete satisfaction with the current system of schooling in Australia, or some other reason, is uncertain.

From these results it appears just as uncertain, doubtful even, whether students draw much of a connection between education, including their future role as teachers, and active citizenship through activism. Knowing how inclined to activism students in other disciplines are compared to the students in this study would be interesting, and a question worth considering. Perhaps

students majoring in political science are more likely to engage in activism and those in business less.

The scant relationship between education and activism in this study's sample also appears to have normalised the increased cost of studying, and in turn the need for students to work while doing so, and the time they spend engaging in these activities. The fact that the median student spent more time working each week than studying and that only a few listed the cost of education as an issue about which they were concerned implies that the majority of students in this sample accept these circumstances. But as some of the results from the interviews and action research phase suggest, lack of time impedes students' ability to engage in activism. This can create a positive feedback loop – the greater the cost of education, the more students must work, and the less time they have to oppose further increases in cost. However, in May 2014 thousands of Australian students took to the streets in opposition to the government's plan to cut funding to higher education and deregulate university tuition fees, arguing that universities should be financed by public, rather than private funding (ABC, 2014). This was followed with sustained media coverage about the government's failed attempt to have the proposed legislation passed by the Senate on not one, but two occasions (see for example Clarke, 2015). So why were the students in this study so disinterested in the topic? The chance that they would not have known anything about it seems unlikely so perhaps there are other reasons for their apathy and lack of engagement.

Most of the student protests opposing the government's proposal to deregulate university tuition and cut funding occurred in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and other large cities (ABC, 2014). The students in this study however were part of a regional university on a relatively small campus. Some of the results from this study suggest that group work is an enabling element for student activism so perhaps the relatively small, and as further results showed fragmented, student body was unable to coalesce enough organised opposition to make the topic predominate over the other issues students listed on the questionnaire. As Neil stated above, he did not know where to begin tackling the issues he had listed due to their complexity, as well as lack of time. Organisation for or against certain social, political, or other issues can indeed be complex and take much time and energy. For someone who has never been involved in activism before knowing where to begin can be daunting, even overwhelming to the point of paralysis and continued non-involvement. However, according to Saha (2004, p. 10) 'once a person has engaged in forms of social and political activism,

no matter how minimal, they are more prone to engage in activism again in the future.' This suggests that one method of fulfilling the educational policy documents cited above in preparing students to be active citizens is to include activism in the syllabus for the HSIE classes in teacher education programs. Pre-service teachers could, for example, be asked to involve themselves in an issue of their choice as part of an assessment for the class. Of course, this would contravene the approach taken in this study whereby students participated voluntarily outside of class, but voting in Australia is compulsory and there is no specific training provided for how to vote 'correctly'. Furthermore, voting is a relatively passive form of citizenship activity compared to activism, so perhaps the suggestion to include the latter in teacher-training programs is a fair assessment. If we are to move beyond mere rhetoric of preparing students to be active citizens, it seems reasonable to suggest that such a change would be a step in the right direction since, as Saha suggests, this would increase the likeliness of further activism in future, which in turn would give teachers a base from which to work when they go about preparing their own students to be active citizens. Doing so would also capitalise on the opportunities for group work which arise naturally in a classroom setting and students could also be given time in class to work on or discuss their activism.

Conclusion

This exploratory study was initiated in response to educational policy in Australia calling for students to be prepared as active citizens. There is no universal consensus on what active citizenship might involve and so it is not obvious why activism, at least as it has been defined and exemplified in this study, should be excluded. On the contrary, many examples of activist work can be argued to fulfil the role of active citizenship quite well. Preparing students to be active citizens through activism can thus act as an important, though not exclusive, component of social change. The political, social, economic, and environmental issues which currently face us are as varied as they are serious and answering the call for active and informed citizens to address such issues is arguably the most important function of the institutions of learning today. The results of this study suggest that the elements of group work and time appear to enable student activism when present and constrain it when absent. The evidence related to self-efficacy appeared more conflicting and suggests this element is less significant. Similar studies which sample students in other disciplines, universities,

age groups, and countries, as well as those which consider other elements which may enable or constrain students' activism would help to either support or discover limitations to the results found in this study. But even when research addressing such a topic 'fails', we can at least seek comfort in having tried to do something about the profusion of issues we face today.

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